

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2010

STADE MARCEL DEFLAND – AMLIN CHALLENGE CUP

GLOUCESTER BATTLE TO 13-6 WIN IN LA ROCHELLE

LA ROCHELLE 6 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 13

Match Report by Duncan Wood

Gloucester had to dig deep and give it everything on this particular French battlefield on Saturday evening, dogging out a narrow and tense 13-6 win to keep their Amlin Challenge Cup hopes alive.

It was a win that answered a lot of questions about the ability of Bryan Redpath's side to win on the road.

This one offered all sorts of possibilities for a setback. A La Rochelle side that bore no relation to the one announced on the Friday and with everything to play for in terms of European qualification, the usual hostile home crowd and the simple fact that the game took place away from the familiar comforts of Kingsholm.

And it wasn't easy. Gloucester had to soak up a massive amount of pressure. The first up defence was magnificent and, after a couple of early rumbles, the brooding menace of Seru Rabeni was well shackled by Mike Tindall and Eliota Fuimaono-Sapolu in midfield.

La Rochelle were restricted to just two long range penalties and the Gloucester line was only rarely threatened.

It was tough for Gloucester in attack as well but one gilt edged chance was carved out and superbly taken. It proved to be the difference between the two sides.

With La Rochelle coming to Kingsholm next Sunday, Agen set to visit in the New Year and a visit to Rovigo to come, Gloucester are now in control of their own European destiny.

It was a highly charged opening as, predictably, Seru Rabeni was quickly into the action. The Fijian shrugged off Nicky Robinson before chipping ahead. Rory Lawson looked to have marked it before being forced into touch.

It put Gloucester under early pressure but the early salvos were rebuffed until a series of turnovers gave La Rochelle a penalty chance and Benjamin Dambielle made no mistake for a 3-0 lead.

Gloucester's response was wholehearted but they were coming off second best in the tactical kicking game and being penalised frequently. The home crowd were backing their team's efforts with gusto as you'd expect from a French audience.

With little coming from the referee, including a late from Rabeni on Robinson[*sic*] which was ignored, it was a time for battenning down the hatches as La Rochelle tried to turn the screw.

Having weathered the storm for the time being, Gloucester struck on 25 minutes. A lineout in the home 22 was driven infield before a quick release saw Luke Narraway take it on before a great inside pass saw James Simpson-Daniel slice through and score the opening try. Robinson converted with ease for a 7-3 lead.

Gloucester were coming into it now and almost extended the lead on the half hour but Robinson's attempted penalty from halfway was just short and struck the post padding.

However, La Rochelle, who were seemingly in disarray at times, were still a threat and almost conjured a try from of nothing on 36 minutes, but knocked the ball over the line when it looked easier to score.

Cool heads were needed and Gloucester safely made it to half time although the chance to extend the lead again slipped through the fingers as Robinson was once again just short and wide with a penalty with the last kick of the half.

It had been a typically tough fixture in France up to this point. La Rochelle were throwing the kitchen sink at Gloucester and the home crowd responded vociferously to every positive move.

Gloucester had soaked it up and struck with a classic counter punch. However, sitting back and defending would not close this game out. More points would be needed and, to achieve that, Gloucester had to be more precise.

And Bryan Redpath's side came out positively with Robinson failing to hold on to an inside ball following a great break from Fuimaono-Sapolu but there was real concern as Olly Morgan needed lengthy treatment before continuing.

It was going to be all about playing the game in the right areas and Gloucester seemed to be well aware of that as they managed to apply some pressure and force a 5m lineout only to be penalised for a man in front of the ball as they drove for the line.

It was tense attritional stuff and neither side was able to get completely on top. Gloucester had enjoyed some good territory but had been unable to pad the lead and La Rochelle were still well and truly in the game as the hour mark approached.

La Rochelle started to empty their bench as they chased the game but Gloucester finally added some more points when Freddie Burns, who had just replaced Robinson, confidently slotted a penalty on 65 minutes and added another on 69 minutes for 13-3.

However, full back Dambielle pegged it back to 13-6 a minute later to ensure a nervy final 10 minutes just as Gloucester looked to have established a significant lead.

A slick backs move had alarm bells ringing with under five minutes to go but a knock on saved Gloucester as they finally looked stretched and the lines were duly cleared.

However, there was still a nervy final onslaught to endure as referee Damasco penalised Gloucester several times to give La Rochelle an ideal attacking position before Scott Lawson took one against the head and Freddie Burns gleefully hoofed the ball off the pitch to secure the points.

JC